German chancellor speaks against US war vs. Iraq

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In a number of public speeches and interviews, Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder (Social Democratic Party, SPD) and Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer (Green Party), as well as other leading government politicians have spoken out against German participation in an attack on Iraq. Their opposition also applies if such an attack were backed up by a United Nations mandate. Regardless what the UN decides, "Germany should decide its own course," SPD Secretary-General Franz Muentefering said at a press conference last week.

At the start of the "hot phase" of the general election campaign in Germany, Chancellor Schroeder told a large meeting in Hanover last Monday that he could "only warn against" launching a war on Iraq "without taking into account the consequences, and without a political concept for the whole of the Middle East". "Whoever goes in there should know what they are getting into and what they want," the chancellor said.

This time there would be no German financial contribution in recompense for a lack of any military participation—as was the case in the first Gulf War in 1991. Germany is no longer the country in which the "cheque book" replaces politics, Schroeder stressed, and expressed his concern that "false priorities were being set in relation to the entire Middle East."

In an interview with the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Foreign Minister Fischer was even more explicit. An attack on Iraq contains "a large, almost incalculable risk," said Fischer.

"The USA possess the military means to force a regime change in Iraq—but are the risks clear?" he asked. "And is it clear that this would involve a complete reorganization of the Middle East, not only militarily, but above all also politically?" This could mean the USA maintaining a presence in this region for many decades. "Whether the Americans are ready for this is an open question. If they withdrew their presence before time, then as direct neighbours of this region we Europeans would have to bear the fatal consequences."

The German government's reservations about an American attack on Iraq are not new. Previously, however, Schroeder and Fischer had utilised predominantly diplomatic channels to express their rejection, and had been more reticent in their public statements. Schroeder had regularly evaded questions about the German attitude to a war against Iraq by noting that President Bush had assured him he would consult the allies before any attack. Schroeder had thereby avoided providing any concrete definition of his own viewpoint.

If the German government is now abandoning the diplomatic path and is formulating its opposition openly and with unusual sharpness, then this is primarily for tactical electoral considerations. For weeks, opinion polls have been forecasting victory for the conservative opposition in the *Bundestag* (parliamentary) elections on September 22 against a government coalition that is losing its own supporters.

Unemployment rose in July to the highest level in four years. At the same time, the German share index slipped to its lowest level in four years. There has been no letup in the bad news coming from the boardrooms of the larger companies and banks. Further mass sackings, short-time working and welfare cuts have already been announced. Federal, state and local government are all suffering from a dramatic decrease in tax revenues, and are planning even more cuts in social expenditure.

The Schroeder government hopes its loud campaign against German participation in the war against Iraq can win back voters. It anticipates that this issue can partially overcome the widespread lack of interest in the election. The fact that the government is making the war question an election campaign topic is simultaneously an open admission that war against Iraq is rejected by broad layers of the population.

The opposition conservative and liberal parties were surprised by Schroeder and Fischer's utterances and reacted with differing, in part openly contradictory views.

The Christian Democratic Union (CDU) politician Wolfgang Schaeuble, who is responsible for foreign and security policies in the conservatives' election campaign team, described German participation in the war on the side of the US government, in an "appropriate form", as necessary. A UN mandate is, however, a prerequisite. CDU foreign affairs specialist Friedbert Pflueger called for German participation even without a UN mandate.

Conservative chancellorship candidate Edmund Stoiber (Christian Social Union, CSU) reacted more cautiously. He said he did not want to be forced into the role of warmonger by Schroeder and refused to make any clear statement. Instead, he attacked the government for making the question of war an election campaign topic. He called the chancellor and foreign minister's behaviour "unworthy and improper" in seeking to use foreign policy themes to win domestic political capital.

This says much about Stoiber's understanding of democracy. He wants the war question, which influences the fate of millions, kept out of the election campaign.

Free Democratic Party (FDP) leader Guido Westerwelle adopted the opposite point of view. He demanded a government declaration by the chancellor and a debate in the *Bundestag* over the issue.

Even if Schroeder and Fischer's words are primarily motivated by electoral tactics, they nevertheless make clear the deep contradictions which have opened up between the US and their European allies in the past years.

In earlier military operations—the first Gulf War, the war against Yugoslavia, in Kosovo and more recently in Afghanistan—the German government supported American actions politically, financially and even militarily despite occasional tensions. In the case of Iraq, the conflict of interests is so deep they are no longer so ready to offer support.

Despite the momentary election campaign hullabaloo, there is a large measure of agreement on this question between government and opposition. Former foreign minister Hans Dietrich Genscher (FDP) said on *Deutschlandfunk* radio he knew "nobody in Germany" who endorses a war against Iraq. And *Die Zeit*, comparing foreign minister Fischer with

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his possible successor Wolfgang Schaeuble, came to the conclusion: “In essence, both see the case of Iraq in a similar light: Schaeuble too has a political horror of a new Gulf War, especially involving German assistance—and Fischer also knows that absolute abstinence (no German participation, either financially or militarily, not even with a UN mandate) is a pure illusion.”

This controversy between government and opposition is not the product of deep-going differences of opinion, but a result of the fear that it could unleash a serious movement against the danger of war. Such a movement, as was shown by the protests against the Vietnam War at the end of the 1960s, can easily turn against one’s own government. This is why the SPD and Greens, threatened with electoral disaster, have decided to make the war against Iraq an election campaign topic. The Union (CDU-CSU) continue to reject this.

Schroeder and Fischer’s criticisms of America’s war plans arise from completely different motives than the rejection of these plans by wide sections of the population, who would regard a military attack by the US on Iraq as an act of unconcealed aggression, and an open war crime motivated by the oil interests and domestic policy aims of the Bush administration. During the 1991 Gulf War, numerous demonstrations took place under the slogan “No Blood for Oil”.

Schroeder and Fischer neither question the right of the US government to replace the government in Baghdad by force of arms with a more compliant regime, nor do they concern themselves with the fate of the Iraqi population and the innumerable victims such a war would create. They are exclusively concerned with the defence of German and European interests in the region, which they see being endangered by the actions of the Bush administration.

This was expressed most clearly by former foreign minister Genscher in his *Deutschlandfunk* interview. “What happens there, concerns Europe more directly than the USA,” he said. “If the already tense situation in the Middle East were intensified, this would have considerable consequences, especially for the Europeans.”

Genscher is addressing the widespread fear in Europe of the economic and political effects of a renewed war against Iraq. Foreign Minister Fischer shares such fears, i.e., that the American government could leap largely unprepared into a military adventure, then withdraw afterwards leaving the European governments with an explosive situation in their immediate vicinity whose consequences cannot be clearly foreseen.

What happens if a US attack on Baghdad destabilised the other regimes in the Middle and Far East? What if an independent Kurdish state were formed in northern Iraq, rekindling the Kurdish question in Turkey again? What if the price of oil rose drastically, pushing the already weakened world economy into a recession? These are the questions presently concerning the European governments.

The geo-strategic consequences of an American protectorate in Iraq would be even more serious. After Saudi Arabia, Iraq has the largest proven oil reserves on the planet. Following the stationing of American troops in central Asia and by the Caspian Sea, as well as Iran entering once more into American foreign policy considerations, the threat is of a US monopoly over the most important energy reserves in the world. This development is followed by the European great powers with increasing suspicion. They are determined to prevent even greater dependency on the US in relation to energy.

Schroeder and Fischer’s criticism of American war plans thus does not arise from the need for peace. Rather, it is an expression of the increasing tensions between the great powers, and represents one of the most important causes for the increasing militarisation of foreign policy.

Regardless how significant the policies of the right-wing clique around George W. Bush are for present developments in the Middle East, the past 10 years of constantly growing appetites for the application of military force cannot be explained by the subjective will of individual politicians. This is proved alone by the fact that this tendency was strengthened under the presidency of Bill Clinton, and that it is the “red-green” coalition in Germany that has done more to return German soldiers to the international stage than possibly any other government since the Second World War.

Global capital strives to subject the entire world to its dictates. American capital, the strongest and therefore the most aggressive, expresses this general tendency only more sharply. Terms like national sovereignty, non-interference in internal affairs and self-determination have largely disappeared from the lexicon of American foreign policy. “Who is not for us is, is against us,” was how Bush so aptly expressed the new foreign policy doctrine.

The German government strives to emulate this. The unscrupulousness with which the present German government and its predecessors promoted the break-up of Yugoslavia, their backing for the bombardment of Belgrade and finally their support in Kosovo for the ultranationalist KLA, are in this regard exemplary.

The American economic crisis and the weakness of the dollar—while at the same time, if only temporarily, the euro has stabilised and achieved parity—has encouraged the German and other European governments to express their criticism of American foreign policy more loudly than before. In addition, they hope for a growing internal American opposition from the side of the Democrats, who are now being frequently quoted with approbation.

How strongly European and American views differ is also shown by Britain. So far the Blair government has tried to maintain its traditional relationship with the US, but now America’s closest ally has also expressed reservations about Washington’s policies. The conservative Sunday *Telegraph* wrote last week of a **“**shameful divide **”** between the US and Britain, while the liberal *Observer* spoke of “signs of division” and the *Financial Times* reported that the British government rejects a military strike against Iraq, as long as there is no relaxation of tensions in the Middle East conflict.

Prime Minister Blair is also under pressure inside his own party. According to an internal study, about 60 Labour MPs could vote against him in any vote on a war against Iraq, and even prominent military figures warn against an Iraqi adventure.

France is one of the main opponents of American policies in the Middle East and Iraq. All French governments over the last years have called for a loosening of sanctions on Iraq, so that the country is able to repay its high debts to France. In an interview with *Le Monde*, Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin called for a “solution of the Iraq problem by discussion,” and left no doubt about the fact that he would use all diplomatic means to prevent a US war against Baghdad.

Similar to developments 90 years ago, when the Balkans were the powder keg for diverging imperialistic interests that led to the First World War, today the diverse interests of the great powers collide in the Middle East.

However, the governments in Berlin, London and Paris are quite clear about the military superiority of the US and are keeping open the possibility of nevertheless jumping on the American chariot at the last moment and of taking part in an Iraqi campaign, in order not to leave the division of the booty to their rivals.

Therefore, the declarations of Schroeder and Fischer against participating in a war on Iraq should not be taken too literally. The German panzers stationed in Kuwait, which would automatically be deployed in a war against Iraq, have not so far been recalled, and German war ships continue patrolling the Horn of Africa. The SPD and the Greens are keeping all their options open.

The fight against the threat of a new Iraqi war, with all its devastating consequences, cannot be left to them and their hollow election promises. It requires an international movement of the working class, which combines the war question with the social question. Imperialist war aims stand in

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direct connection to social and political oppression at home. The only real ally of European workers against the aggressive war policies of the Pentagon is the American working class.

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